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Preaching Acceptance

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BY NICOLE PRESLEY DESIGN MADISON JERDE PHOTO LIZ ZABEL

A man about God helps students grow spiritually, regardless of sexual orientation.

Jon Page, a minister at the United Church of Christ, first realized he was gay at the age of 11 or 12. He tried talking to a priest about it since his parents weren't interested in discussing it. The priest then gave him a website address that promoted the "ex-gay" movement. The website listed some of the reasons why its creators thought he was gay: you had too many girl friends when you were younger; you didn't go out and play enough sports; you were too close to your mother; you are too feminine, not manly enough.

"This I found rather amusing," Page says. "I was a three sport varsity athlete in high school, I went to an all boys high school, all of my friends were men—not women—in college, I was a Division 1 athlete and I was in a fraternity."

He was close to his mother, but does that really turn a person gay? "If their one recommendation is to stop loving my mother, then I'm afraid I don't think their solution is particularly relevant," Page says. "Those movements are all based on quack science and not very well thought through."

Page believes that although verses in the Bible like Leviticus 20:13 say men who lie with other men should be put to death, the Bible doesn't condemn homosexuality—at least not anymore than other sins.

"I don't believe those passages in the New Testament and Old Testament referencing gender relations are interpreted the right way when you condemn some of these people," Page says. "And even if you do, you

should still acknowledge the fact that you're just as much a sinner and if you're saved by anything, you're saved by grace—period. And not only that, you continue to sin."

Page follows Saint Augustine of Hippo's documented views of how the Bible should be interpreted. "One thing he said was if you come across a text and your interpretation of that text doesn't lead to greater love of God or greater love of neighbor, you've clearly misinterpreted the text," Page says.

Page was also an advisor for the campus organization Students for Progressive Christianity, which addresses issues related to acceptance in the church. He helped found the group in early 2012.

"Certainly LGBT issues are being [discussed] in this day and age," Page says. "I think it's somewhat unfortunate but it seems like one of the tests of orthodoxy these days is 'Do you think you can be gay and Christian at the same time or not?' Obviously our group says a resounding yes to that."

Zach Houborg, SPC president and also openly gay, believes Page's background and Biblical knowledge—which he displays proudly by wearing a black academic robe for Sunday masses—are beneficial for the group and its members.

"Jon actually went to Harvard and got his seminary degree and he's very well versed," Houborg says. "I remember he got up there [at Cornerstone Church] and he said, 'By the way, there's another way to look at this, there's another interpretation. I'm a pastor here, I'm gay, I'm religious.'"

Sexual orientation is not a choice or a disease according to Page. He compared the literal interpretation of homosexuality in the Bible to the way people treat an illness. When we get ill, we go to the doctor. We don't perform an exorcism to expel the demon who caused the sickness as they did in the first century.

"I found myself in a boat where I wasn't mentally stable or mentally healthy because I believed it wasn't possible to be gay and a Christian," Houborg says. "Basically feeding off of what other people in mega churches were telling me, what my parents were

always telling me or what conservative Baptist churches were telling me. That was harmful to me. Ever since meeting Jon, he's helped me come to terms with accepting myself and being able to accept my relationship with God and religion."

Thanks to Page, SPC aims to help others like Houborg.

"[SPC's goal is] to provide a place for religious and intellectual conversation that is

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safe and diverse and also to educate people," Houborg says. "'Cause a lot of people are trapped in their little boxes of thinking. They come from home and they enter this college experience and their minds are still formed around what they grew up with and thinking on issues when it comes to LGBT rights or the Bible says this, and we're just here to provide other interpretations or other methods of dealing with one's sexual orientation and gender identity when it comes to their relationship with religion or their faith."

According to the ISU student organization website, SPC is all-inclusive: "conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities and those of all classes and abilities [are welcome]."

"The group is very accepting of different sexual orientations," Houborg says. "We believe homosexuality is not a choice. It's just as part of who you are, as your hair or your eye color or any other talents that God gave you. We look at that as a special part of you."

Although national acceptance is growing, people within the LGBT community still face adversity.

"It would be, in my mind, unthinkable for Jesus not to stand up and say, 'This teenager who killed himself because he's gay is somehow a good thing or of God,'" Page says. "That just seems so alien to anything that has to do with God."

Page has helped many feel welcome through his work in ministry and on campus.

"We just feel that we were incredibly blessed to have Jon with us for two and a half years," says Cornelia Flora, a member of United Church of Christ and a retired ISU professor of sociology. "He's totally transformed our church and I think increased everyone's level of spirituality and also our sense of commitment, collectively, for social justice."

Another UCC member and current sociology professor, Paul Lasley, also had nice things to say about Page. "The congregation was very saddened to see him go, but God is leading him in a different direction. Jon was a breath of fresh air."

Page has recently left the United Church of Christ and moved to the east coast to be closer to friends and family. His last sermon was Sunday, Dec. 29. He served the United Church of Christ for two and a half years, and served as an advisor to SPC for almost two years.

"If we are made in the image of God and if God does see into our deepest fears, God already knows who we are," Page says. "God already knows what we're thinking. There's no reason why you should hide that." 